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Poetry

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LOST IN NEW ZEALAND, LOST IN THE FIFTIES

It looks like central West Virginia
in 1958. The two-lane road climbs
past tobacco barns and shotgun houses,
narrows at every bridge, so everyone waits,
sometime. And I'm as lost as I was then,
the night Dreama Pennington left me six miles
up a holler off Coal Rivcr Road, and I had to thumb home
barefoot and shirtless, holding my Levis up
with one hand because she had my belt,
and had seen me at the Dairy Queen with Reba Workman.

The fisherman I stopped to ask said
Ngatimoti is four miles west, though
all the posted distances and speeds
are in kilometers that this old Ford's
round dials can't calculate. The radio's static
blurs the disc jockey's lead into " back-to-
back-to back Oldies but Goodies,"
repentance songs that last until the next
country store where I buy chesses and crackers,
cold beans, and enough Steinlager for the drive
to Okarito. With new directions,
Brenda Lee, the Platters, Brothers Ames and I
apologize our way along the coast –
sorry for old mistakes, for being young,
and middle aged and older, ashamed of lost heads,
cold eyes, and blind hearts, spiteful words
and silences, hard looks, and hot licks
on the wrong pianos, good booze, bad company,
lust gluttony and sloth, thoughts of suicide
or worse, and getting caught with Reba Workman.

Night pours out of the mountains. Eighty miles south
the long bridge I've heard about at Hokitika waits:
one lane, cars approaching both ways, and up
the center, railroad tracks. You could come her,
Dreama, sit close on this Crown Victoria's
tucked and rolled upholstery, our faces smoothed
in the soft dash lights. Mellow on good beer
and the purr of customized dual mufflers,
we'd bear down on that bridge in the dark,
doing a legal hundred on the wrong side of the road.

SCATOLOGY

(In Memory of John Maher)

Circles of matted grass in the orchard
tell me nine deer slept last night beneath the brown husks
of cider apples, uncurled after the hoar frost fell,
and tip-toed uphill into the yellowed hickories.
In each bed, scat gleams like oiled buckshot.

"Scatological." The last time we talked, our first
conversation in thirty years, I said that word,
and you smiled, remarking how it came so naturally,
and how I'd changed since high school. You probably
knew what that word meant then. You, the most promising
of us all, eaten up with cancer at fifty-four.

Last night, watching the World Series, I thought
of our playing a whole seven games between
the Yankees and the Dodgers one night on your mother's
kitchen table. I won. Pitching Don Newcombe
in four games, my arm tired just throwing the dice.
Eighteen years later, in Honolulu, I read a small
notice in the sports pages listing Newcombe
as a patient in Kaiser Hospital. They thought
he might die from liver disease. I lived two miles
away and thought of visiting him, but didn't.

Two days after last Christmas, I'd packed the car,
and was ready to leave when my father called me
into the cold garage to help him free the rusted knuckle
on the tractor's stabilizer bar, confessing
as our hands curled around the pipe wrench
that in the last two years his body had turned to shit.

In the past two weeks, another friend, a colleague's wife,
and a student who had dropped my Keats course
died. Still another friend called from Boston
three nights ago to say he had disconnected
his father's life support after a heart attack and stroke.

I didn't visit you, either, John, didn't call or write,
though I knew you were dying in Atlanta. No words
seemed natural, and you were my age and promising.

Yesterday, the second morning in a row, while the deer
ghosted from the stiff grass in the orchard, I rolled over
in bed and awoke with the room turning around me,

not in dream, nor metaphor, but spinning, really spinning,
so that for the first five minutes after getting up I walked
around holding on to things. Holding on to things. Shit.

HANGOVER FLY

Tied to imitate
a fat, white nymph,
the hair of the dog
dead now four years
still takes trout.
Its wet bristles criss-
cross my thumb like scars
barbed wire inscribes
when I shake loose
the hook boned
in the rainbow's jaw.

Afraid I couldn't do it
after, I dug her grave
in the rain
while she watched,
half-blind and deaf,
nosing the slick clods
until the clay stained
her muzzle rusty.
Her damp fur clotted
on my hands when I
lifted her into the truck.

All day I have followed
my nymph downstream
to where the river braids,
spills to one sound,
and disappears in shadows.
My legs are gone
to the cold. My backcast,
collapsing in tired loops,
threatens to bury my hood
past the barb in the
loose, graying folds of my neck.

Don Johnson, who was an English department faculty member at B.S.C. from 1971–1983, currently teaches at East Tennessee State University where he has served as both department chair and dean of the College of Arts and Sciences. He lives on the banks of the Watauga River in a house that was built in 1791.

"These poems came from several different sources. The New Zealand poem came out of a trip to the South Island about ten years ago. I was struck by how similar the landscape was to the area in West Virginia where I grew up. It was also amazing to me the extent to which American culture had become so much a part of the day-to-day lives of the Kiwis—old rock and roll songs on the car radio, American cars from the fifties and sixties, etc. It was strange driving an old American car on the left side of the road, however. "Scatology" is pretty straightforward. It originated in a conversation with a high school friend at our 30th reunion. I had not seen him since the night we had graduated from high school. He went on to Princeton and a good job with IBM, and I drifted into the study of English literature. A few years after the reunion I heard that he was dying of cancer and then that he had died in Atlanta. His passing led to the other thoughts on death and vulnerability. The poem about the fishing fly is true. I do have a fly tied from the hair of a dog I had put down just before the trip to N. Zealand. She literally nosed around the grave I was digging for her before I took her to the veterinarian."

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